

## **‘Inspired to Follow: Art and the Bible Story’**

### **Alternative Reflection for Session 14: The Trial of Jesus**

**Offered at Greenbelt 2017, Session 1, Meeting Christ on the Way, a taster for ‘Inspired to Follow: Art and the Bible Story’ on Saturday, 26 August 2017, 11.45am - 12:45pm, in Canvas/The Shelter**

**Text: Matthew 26:57-68**

**Image: ‘Christ before the High Priest’, Gerrit van Honthorst, c.1617, NG3679**

#### A note on the artist and the painting:

This painting ‘*Christ before the High Priest*’ is by the Dutch Golden Age<sup>1</sup> painter Gerrit van Honthorst (1592–1656) and was painted about 1617. Honthorst was born in Utrecht in the Netherlands the son of a decorative painter. He became one of the main Dutch followers of Caravaggio, whose style he popularised in Holland on his return from a stay in Rome, 1610–20. This is one of his most famous paintings and shows the powerful influence of Caravaggio. It’s one of the most popular paintings in the National Gallery, and when the Gallery’s paintings were taken to Wales in 1939 at the outbreak of war, this is one that remained in London. It’s one of three paintings from the night of Jesus’ arrest and trial which suit van Honthorst’s interest in night-time scenes with strong illumination by man-made fire and flame.

#### Reflection:

Let’s begin by hearing our Biblical reading from Matthew’s gospel. [Reading.]

Thank you to all our readers. Now you may recall that a couple of years ago the comedian and presenter Stephen Fry made this accusation: “How dare God create a world in which there is such misery that’s not our fault? It’s not right. It’s utterly evil. Why should I respect a capricious, mean-minded, stupid God who creates a world which is so full of injustice and pain?”<sup>2</sup> Based on this premise, Stephen Fry argued the case for there being no God at all. Other contemporary atheists have done the same. However, such finger-pointing at God is not something new.

The author of Psalm 22, writing many centuries ago, also points the finger at God, if in a more personalised way. “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” and he continues: “Why are you so far from saving me, so far from heeding my groans?” And of course a few hours after the scene before us, depicted by the Dutch painter van Honthorst, Jesus himself throws the first of these accusations at God.

<sup>1</sup> The Dutch Golden Age was a period in Dutch history, roughly spanning the 17th century, in which Dutch trade, science, military, and art were among the most acclaimed in the world.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2015/feb/01/stephen-fry-god-evil-maniac-irish-tv>

Most of us in our turn have probably blamed or accused God at some stage. Either for the sin and evil in the world, as Fry did. Or for the misfortunes or horrors that befall us, as both the Psalmist and Jesus did.

Van Honthorst's painting has a deep resonance in our world, where pointing the finger of blame is rife. One of my colleagues at St Martin-in-the-Fields once took a group of homeless people to visit the National Gallery. When they came to this painting, the group focused on the pointing finger. "If you're homeless you get pointed at and accused all the time," one of them said, "You're always in a place of judgement." At that very moment, one of the gallery attendants came over and told off the group for standing too close to the painting, wagging his finger at them while he did so. They all laughed aloud. For this was exactly the accusing finger they'd been talking about.

You'll be familiar with this phenomenon yourself, from our national and global political life. One could argue that the campaign to exit from the European Union was built on finger-pointing. And there are current political leaders elected as a result of skilful and persistent pointing of the finger at others, at societal scapegoats.

Here, in this early 17<sup>th</sup> Century painting, we see Jesus being accused by the High Priest Caiaphas. Where does power lie in this picture? It clearly lies with the man in the seat of power, with the book of authority before him, ready to be quoted in bolstering his accusations – or is it to record the sentence on the accused? Before him stands a bedraggled man, in the proverbial dock. Does he stand defiantly? Or belligerently? No, our painter has depicted a gentle, lamb-like man. Yes, he looks directly at his accuser, but in a resigned, even pained manner. He's not cowed, but neither is he resisting. He's a sacrificial lamb knowing that he's going to the slaughter.

The central point of the painting is the candle. The light it casts throws the figures closest to it into sharp relief: the accusatory Caiaphas, with deeply furrowed brow; the stationery Jesus, with resignation in his look. The further away they are from the light, the more obscure the figures and faces become. Technically, it's reminiscent of Caravaggio's paintings, one of which we'll be looking at on Monday, and which we know strongly influenced Van Honthorst, following a visit to Italy.

One of the questions the painting leaves us with is this: Where are you in the painting? Are you with Caiaphas and Stephen Fry, pointing the finger? Are you a supporter of the one making the accusations? Or perhaps you're one of those reluctantly rounded up to testify against Jesus? Or maybe you're one of those trying to keep order, hoping to ensure some kind of fair play? Or one of Jesus' groupies, who's managed to sneak in, but daren't speak up for fear of being accused yourself?

Perhaps, instead, you see yourself in the figure of Jesus. You're feeling falsely accused, and being held responsible for things you didn't commit – or even ones to which you could only plead guilty, if you were being honest. In any case, you're resigned to taking the blame, whether justly or unjustly so.

But another question that this painting leaves us with is this: Where is God in this painting? Perhaps, after all, God is in the fatherly figure sitting on the judgement seat. Is that how you see God, ready and waiting to accuse you and others for all your shortcomings and failures, all your falling into sin?

Or maybe you see God as on the sidelines, letting human beings get on with working out their fighting and conflicts on their own, without getting hands dirty. A kind of detached observer, with his arms crossed, like the man behind the High Priest.

But if God really is in this figure on the right, with the light cascading onto him, even from him, then what is going on? Why is Jesus silent before all the accusations against him? If he's God, why isn't he defending himself, and putting the others right? Why does he remain so quiet and accepting of what's going on? Why doesn't he call on the angels and archangels to defend him? Why doesn't he call down fire from heaven like the prophet Elijah? Why doesn't he *do* something?

Which brings us back to Stephen Fry's accusations. How could God let evil and sin enter this world? And why doesn't God fix it – if this God really is the Lord Almighty and the God of Hosts.

So we're left with a number of questions. Questions that the Jewish gospel writer Matthew doesn't resolve for us. Questions that the Dutch painter Gerrit van Honthorst doesn't answer for us. I wonder what answers you're finding, as you wrestle with the questions of where you find yourself, and where you find God in this story and this painting.

*Reflection by Revd Dr Alastair McKay  
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**‘Art and the Bible Story: Inspired to Follow’**

**Alternative prayer for Session 14: The Trial of Jesus**

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*A closing prayer (for the end of the session):*

Almighty and gracious God, who’s made your ways known in the Lamb of God, your Son Jesus Christ;

Draw close to all in our society and our world who are unjustly accused and scapegoated, and reassure them of your presence with them on their journeys;

Help us to point the finger less, to be more critically self-reflective, and to be those who’ll speak up for people who are picked on by others;

Grant that we might receive your kingdom in humility, with courage, and strengthened to endure all that you call us to in following Jesus, with the promise of one day meeting your loving embrace, face-to-face.

Amen.